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ABSTRACT

Recent state and federal laws require specific changes with regard to the evaluation and placement of special education students, many of which are beyond the principal's knowledge or expertise. Thirteen elementary principals were interviewed to discover the strategies used by principals before referring a student for special education, as well as the preparatory activities they engaged in prior to multidisciplinary team (MDT) and individual educational program (IEP) meetings. The principals' responses regarding their role in such meetings reflected a lack of consensus. In general, the principals viewed themselves as responsible for insuring that students who require special education receive the needed services. Most often principals perform a validating role in which their presence at MDT and IEP meetings lends greater validity to the proceedings. Specific suggestions for principals include getting all relevant people involved in such meetings, helping participants define their roles, and periodically monitoring the progress of special education students. (JEH)

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IEP Development and Implementation:

The Role of the Elementary Principal

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INTRODUCTION

Responding to diverse student needs within a framework provided by Federal and State Regulations has become a major challenge for educational administrators. This study investigates the relationship of the elementary principal to the special education referral, planning, and placement process. Increased interest in the relationship of the principal to this process is related to Federal and State Special Education Regulations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dominant themes of special education regulations include: Due Process Procedural Safeguards, Protection in the Evaluation Process, the Individualized Education Program, and placement in the Least Restrictive Environment (USOE/BEH, 1978). Due Process includes a series of procedural safeguards designed to protect the civil rights of the student by requiring informed parental consent throughout the process. Protection in the Evaluation Process shields the child from a potential discriminatory evaluation through the use of pluralistic assessment practices. Collaboratively developed by parents, teacher(s), and administrator, the individualized education program insures specially designed instruction which responds to the identified needs of each handicapped student. The least restrictive environment is that educational setting within which identified needs of a handicapped student are met while simultaneously providing opportunities for incidental learning through interaction with non-handicapped students.

In order to implement these dominant themes, the perceptions and practices of educational administrators must change. For practices associated with these themes to be effectively implemented, change at the school level is required. The school principal must become actively

involved. Sarason (1971) notes that the principal plays a fateful role in the process of change within the school. Special education changes pose particular problems for principals. For "with increasing frequency the principal is involved with a variety of special services that are beyond his own areas of knowledge and expertise and, because they are administratively not under his jurisdiction, complicate his problems with leadership, responsibility, and power" (Sarason, 1971).

With regard to specialized knowledge and expertise, Stile and Pettibone (1980) recommended "that all educational administrators become 'special' administrators through training in special education competencies." Competencies required by general education administrators to implement special education programs were investigated by Nevin (1979). Forty-seven systematically developed competency statements were submitted to Vermont superintendents, assistant superintendents, and principals. Eight special education competencies were identified as essential to the performance of job responsibilities. "Statements that surfaced as essential concerned assuring due process, interpreting federal and state laws, using appropriate leadership styles, showing that records comply with due process and confidentiality requirements, resolving conflicts among program personnel, using evaluation data to make program revisions for exceptional learners, and determining staff functions and qualifications for educational programs for handicapped learners."

Role expectations for multidisciplinary team (MDT) members were investigated (Fenton, Yoshida, Maxwell, and Kaufman, 1977). Twenty-five MDT activities were clustered into five types on a survey questionnaire.

The roles of principal, school psychologist, special teacher, and regular teacher were investigated by MDT members. "For principals, there was positive concensus about three of the five types of activities . . . evaluative, maintenance, and administrative ones." Other team members viewed maintenance and administrative activities as appropriate for principals. Maintenance activities include: keep the group on task, encourage others to participate, resolve conflicts of opinions, critique members actions. Administrative activities include: determine team membership, structure the meeting agenda, delegate team tasks to members, establish meeting dates, assign responsibility for implementation of the student's special education program, disseminate the team decisions to appropriate personnel, communicate team decisions to parents.

A sample of general education administrators reported spending 14.6% of their time performing fifteen different special education duties (Raske, 1979). Duties most frequently performed included: participating in IEP meetings (18.2% of time), filling out special education forms (16.7% of time), reviewing referrals for special education (8.3% of time), and supervising and coordinating the annual review, IEP and follow-up systems (8.1% of time).

For the dominant special education policy themes to be implemented in practice at the school building level the principals must perform role related work. Special education competencies essential to their job performance were identified by general education administrators. Three of the top four special education duties performed by general education administrators were within the referral, planning, and placement process.

Multidisciplinary team members perform most of the work in this process; tasks judged as appropriate for principals are crucial to implementation of instructionally relevant aspects of special education policy.

This investigation was conducted as part of a personnel development project designed to facilitate implementation of the individualized education program as placement, instructional, and planning tools. The IEP is developed in the special education referral, planning, and placement process. Efforts to implement the IEP require clarification of the developmental process and the roles performed by those who participate in the process.

METHODOLOGY

Thirteen elementary principals from two school districts were interviewed in their schools using a seventy-two item structured interview schedule. Interview schedule items were arranged to parallel the sequence of the special education referral, planning, and placement process. Interviews ranged from one hour and fifty minutes to three hours and twenty minutes; the average length of each interview was two hours and fifteen minutes.

Notes were taken during each interview; complete responses to questions were dictated immediately after the interview. A typed copy of their interview together with a typed group summary of modal responses were distributed to principals in each district. Principals were asked to review the content of their interviews and the group interview summary. Any inaccuracies were to be noted. Group meetings were held with principals in

each district to review interview content for accuracy and implications. Data reported here include corrections provided by principals in these meetings.

RESULTS

Results reported were acquired from four sections of the interview schedule: Referral information, Multidisciplinary Team meetings, IEP meetings, and the principals' self-perceived responsibilities for special education.

Referral Information

Strategies used by principals before referring a student for special education consideration include promoting a peer professional support system for the teacher related to the problem and informing parents of difficulties being experienced by their child in school. Principals are generally satisfied with the effectiveness of these two strategies. Different referral procedures are used in the two school districts; differences relate to the early and continuous levels of interaction among general and special educators. In District One, resource teachers observe students in classrooms and consult with teachers before a referral for special education is considered. Referral forms are jointly completed by resource and classroom teachers. Both the classroom teacher and the resource teacher are usually present when the referred student is reviewed at regularly scheduled Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) meetings. District Two principals did not describe continuous classroom teacher-resource teacher interactions.

The number of students referred for special education consideration ranged from four to thirty-three; the number of students referred averaged sixteen students per school. Variability in the number of students referred does not seem related to the size of the school, characteristics of the student population, or the resourcefulness of the faculty. Such variability may be related to perceptions of student-experienced problems and perceptions of special education possessing potential solutions to each student-experienced problem.

Multidisciplinary Team Meetings

State special education regulations require performance of specific functions by the Multidisciplinary Team (MDT). The following activities are generally performed by the MDT: review referrals, formulate evaluation questions, identify evaluators and evaluation procedures, collect evaluation information, report and synthesize evaluation results, determine students' eligibility for special education, and review evaluation information for its instructional relevance. The progress of some students enrolled in special education programs is reviewed by some MDTs. MDTs meet at each school on a regularly scheduled basis in both District One and District Two. Over time, many activities are completed by the MDT with each handicapped student. Often, activities are performed with several different students in the same MDT meeting. Nearly all principals reported experiencing confusion about the multiple activities performed at MDT meetings.

Principals prepare for MDT meetings by reviewing the list of students to be considered, by discussing students with teachers, reading students' cumulative folders and notes from previous meetings, and by working out logistics to insure the presence of appropriate personnel. The chair of MDT meetings in six schools is the principal; the resource teacher chairs the MDT meeting in three schools; the special education director chairs the meeting in two schools; and, the school psychologist chairs MDT meetings in two schools.

Principals report participating in MDT meetings by observing, listening, requesting clarification, presenting relevant information, and prompting others to present information. Despite some recognition that placement decisions may be made only at IEP meetings, some principals reported a more active role when school level special education placement alternatives for a student are discussed by the MDT.

IEP Meetings

The individualized education program (IEP) manages specially designed instruction which responds to a handicapped student's unique needs. It is developed collaboratively by parents, the child's teacher, and an administrator in a meeting.

These principals' responses generally reflect this view of the IEP although "specially designed instruction" is considered as synonymous with a student's special education placement. Consensus among principals regarding the most significant parts of the IEP and its developmental processes was not evident.

During the IEP meeting these principals neither identify a student's present levels of performance nor do they directly participate in generating annual goals. IEPs were described as generally useful to special educators and related service personnel as an instructional tool. Principals saw the IEP as having limited utility for classroom teachers. A common pattern of functions performed by these principals at the IEP meetings did not emerge in these interviews. Outcomes of the IEP meeting include: placement, compliance with Federal and State laws, and fulfillment of a contractual obligation between parents and the school.

Principals' Special Education Responsibilities

These principals view themselves as responsible for insuring that students in their schools who require special education receive it. To see that the student gets the services identified on the IEP should be a practical extension of this responsibility. Principals reported working from 1½ to eight hours with an average of 3.5 hours per week on special education. In their view, general educators and special educators should be jointly working toward mutually established student goals.

These principals neither monitor nor evaluate the implementation of IEPs by general and special educators. The extent to which the specially designed instruction/related services accomplish their anticipated outcomes (goals and objectives) is not assessed by these principals.

Successfully dealing with a handicapped student's problems, observing handicapped students make noticeable improvement, and being viewed as someone special were all identified as sources of satisfaction experienced

by principals. In their view, special educators have made general educators more aware of the seriousness of some students' problems rather than simply describing a problem as a character deficit. On the other hand, special educators have learned about the real demands experienced by general educators as they instruct large, diverse groups of normal students.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the role of the elementary principal in the special education referral, planning and placement process. Responses of thirteen principals in two New England school districts were elicited within structured interviews. Results suggest that these principals attend meetings, experience some confusion about the multiple purposes of MDT meetings, have a general understanding of IEP meeting outcomes, and experience a sense of responsibility for the services received by handicapped students in their schools.

Participation in the special education referral, planning, and placement process reflects leadership, responsibility, and power complications experienced by these principals. Rather than administrative and maintenance roles, these principals seem to perform a validating role. MDT and IEP meetings seem to acquire validity through the principal's presence. Effective performance of process activities like those described as administrative and maintenance activities requires a clear sense for the product outcome. The most significant outcome of the special education referral, planning, and placement process is specially designed instruction which responds to the unique needs of each handicapped student. Specially designed instruction includes what is taught, how it is taught, when it is taught, and by whom it is taught.

Specially designed instruction can be provided in both general and special education settings.

Each handicapped student's unique needs often influence performance in the general education setting. Most handicapped students are taught in both general education and special education settings--they are "mainstreamed." "Mainstreaming refers to the temporal, instructional, and social integration of eligible exceptional children with normal peers based upon an ongoing, individually determined educational planning and programming process" (Kaufman, Gottlieb, Agard and Kukic, 1975). The principal may play a fateful role in the development and implementation of integrated instructional programs for handicapped students. Integrated programs provide specially designed instruction in both general and special education settings. Ongoing interaction among general and special educators is crucial to an evolving instructionally integrated program. The principal, in the leadership role, can structure opportunities for general educator-special educator interaction.

When principals chair MDT and IEP meetings, they often find themselves at a distinct disadvantage due mainly to their limited background in special education. Most principals have had minimal training and no teaching experience in the area. Yet the responsibility for chairing meetings is the principal's. Quite often it becomes either a matter of trial and error or of allowing others with more expertise in the field to dominate the meetings; the result is one individual making planning and placement decisions instead of corporate decisions through interdisciplinary input. By eliciting information and ideas from all persons involved, the principal can increase effective group decision making.

Getting all relevant people involved in MDT and IEP meetings often presents scheduling problems. It is extremely difficult to hold meetings at a time that is convenient for all, especially the special education teachers and the regular classroom teachers, whose unassigned time is limited. The principal can design the school master schedule so that all teachers of the same grade level are available for meetings at the same time during a given day--the day that the MDT meets at the school. Along with the master schedule design, the principal can vary the starting time of meetings to align with involved teacher's availability. To maximize professional participation, the principal must set the agenda well in advance of each meeting and inform all participants in advance so they can adjust their schedules accordingly. If this preceding procedure cannot be accomplished, an alternative would be for the MDT to have assigned to it a roving substitute teacher who would free classroom teachers to attend the meetings.

It is the principal who has to take the initiative in clearly defining the roles of each professional. Everyone does have to know what his role is and exactly what is expected. General educators who have had no contact with handicapped students in the past must be walked step-by-step through the process in which they will be involved. Instruction in reporting student information to the team should be provided. Conversely, the general educator's expectations of the MDT should be established. Teachers should be invited to observe MDT and IEP meetings before they participate, so as to better understand the process.

The principal can arrange for awareness programs for parents to insure that they can become appropriately and actively involved throughout

the referral, planning and placement process. Special efforts should minimize parents being overwhelmed when confronted by an entire team of professionals, as is presently the case.

Similar to classroom instruction which requires follow-up activities and evaluation, it is imperative that the principal periodically and systematically monitor each IEP to assure that a student is properly placed and that the goals and objectives established for that student are still suited to that child's current needs. Some students experience rapid spurts of growth or regression; therefore, modification of goals, objectives, and/or placement may be required during the school year. The principal should not wait for classroom teachers, parents, or resource specialists to initiate changes, but rather should arrange periodic meetings to re-assess each child's learning. These formal meetings should be scheduled at least twice per year and should include all multi-disciplinary team members and the child's classroom teachers. If at these meetings there is agreement that the child's IEP requires change, the parents should be met, changes discussed and implemented with parental agreement and support. Additionally, the principal should schedule small staff meetings to discuss the general progress of assigned handicapped students and the status of students experiencing difficulty. These meetings may be held on a monthly basis by grade levels or departments.

Teachers should inform parents of their child's performance in relation to instructional objectives on a quarterly basis. This will serve to inform parents of the effectivenss of the IEP and help to assess their child's present status. These reports should be the focus of parent-teacher conferences throughout the year.

It is incumbent upon the principal to take an active and aggressive role in special education changes. The principal must assure that professional staff and parents are aware of their roles and actively participate in the process; then, all students can benefit from instructionally integrated programs.

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